Editor's Column

This Thing Called Literature . . . What Work Does It Do?

When I left home to attend the University of Nairobi to study literature, my maternal grandmother, a semiliterate woman, posed two questions that have driven and haunted my life since: what is this thing called literature? what work does it do? It was not hard to comprehend where these questions came from or why they were important to my grandmother. Like most members of the extended maternal side of my family, she hoped that I would go into the law. They expected that once I graduated from the university, trained to understand the laws of the English Commonwealth and duly admitted into the bar, I would take over a protracted land case, one that had been going on as long as anyone could remember. In those days, the mid-1970s, litigation had become a crucial part of postcolonial life as black families and communities sought to buy land from white settlers; having a lawyer in the family was equivalent to having a son in the priesthood.

The law did not hold much interest for me, but in the summer before I took my A-level exams, I was briefly tempted by the possibility of becoming a barrister. I was eighteen years old, lost in what was bound to be the last summer of my childhood; I was reading George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* and trying to understand the structure of the bildungsroman but also privately relishing the happy mornings that Maggie and Tom Tulliver were spending together "with no thought that life would ever change much for them" (45). "Life did change for Tom and Maggie," and when the idyllic dream of childhood was broken, I wondered whether Eliot's wrenching narrative of loss and suffering could have been averted if Tom had had the sense and education to be what was denied Maggie because of her gender—"a match for the lawyers" (222). It briefly occurred to me that many

© 2012 by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press



FIG. 1
West Mill, on Lime Kiln Farm, Sherborne, Dorset. Copyright © 2003 Mills Archive Trust (The Alan Stoyel Collection).

of the problems in the novel could have been resolved if the Tulliver family had had a legal mind to match Mr. Wakem.

About the same time, seeking another baggy monster for comparison and contrast, I picked up Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, and for the rest of August I found myself mired in, and enthralled by, the events in the Court of Chancery:

> Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on. This scarecrow of a suit has, in course of time, become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means. The parties to it understand it least; but it has been observed that no two Chancery lawyers can talk about it for five minutes, without coming to a total disagreement as to all the premises. Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old people have died out of it. Scores of persons have deliriously found themselves made parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, without knowing how or why; whole families have inherited legendary hatreds with the suit. The little plaintiff or defendant, who was promised a new rocking-horse when Jarndyce and Jarndyce should be settled, has grown up, possessed himself of a real horse, and trotted away into the other world. Fair wards of court have faded into mothers and grandmothers; a long procession of Chancellors has come in and gone out; the legion of bills in the suit have been transformed into mere bills of mortality; there are not three Jarndyces left upon the earth perhaps, since old Tom Jarndyce in despair blew his brains out at a coffee-house in Chancery Lane; but Jarndyce and Jarndyce still drags its dreary length before the Court, perennially hopeless. (16–17)

It was a stunning moment. Here, side by side, were the terror of the law and the mesmerizing power of language. That August, Dickens's prose pushed me in the direction that has led me to this point—the editorship of *PMLA*.

The Defense of Literature

I could not tell my grandmother that literature transported me to other worlds, other experiences; I could not say that it enabled me to imagine things that I had never encountered, such as the mill in an English village or the Court of Chancery in London (figs. 1 and 2). I would not pass on the lesson of textuality—that there was nothing outside language—or the gospel of the social imaginary, the power of narratives to shape worlds.[1] The idea that literature could provide one with a space of thinking outside the strictures of codes and custom was seductive, but in the world in which I grew up a love of words had to be cast in the language of a recognizable vocation. Although I had stubbornly and selfishly decided to make letters my life, this did not liberate me from the need or desire

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to explain this thing called literature to befuddled relatives and neighbors: what is this thing called literature? what work does it do? why did you get into it? The questions would not go away.

I might have been tempted to argue that literature prepared one for a career in the civil service, publishing, or journalism. But I was uncomfortable with this utilitarian defense. I lived with the deep sense that there had to be something more to this engagement with imagined stories, plays, or poems, beyond the mandate of a vocation. Unable to say that literature trained one to be a good clerk in the immigration department, I sought to endow it with the aura of a *differend*—it was an experience that could not yet be put into phrases.[2] But such abstractness could not get one far in the postcolonial modern.

Trying to find a middle ground between utilitarianism and abstraction, I followed what appeared to be the tradition in the Nairobi school of English: one located the power of literature in its sociality, its ability to intervene in social life and change society. Indeed, in the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi, the language of consciousness and social change defined the literary project. I craved this language and wrapped it around me as both silk and sackcloth. During my second or third day at the university, I made my way into the crowded stacks of the Gandhi Memorial Library looking for Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," described by Friedrich Engels as the "brilliant germ of the new world outlook" (8).

I found it in Robert Tucker's *Marx-Engels Reader*. Never before had the task at hand been so clearly stated for an ambitious young intellectual: Feuerbach's "chief defect," I read, was to conceive reality in "the form of the object or of *contemplation*," not as "*human sensuous*



FIG. 2

Court of Chancery, Lincoln's Inn. Aquatint by Thomas Rowlandson and Augustus Charles Pugin. From *The Microcosm of London; or, London in Miniature* (vol. 1; [1808]; London: Methuen, 1904; *The Internet Archive*; Web; 27 Oct. 2011) pl. facing 193.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

activity, *practice*, not subjectively" (143). Idealism and mysticism thwarted a proper understanding of social life as "essentially practical." I was taught that the best form of theory would lead one away from mysticism and toward a comprehension of "sensuousness as practical activity"; that the standpoint of the new materialism was "*human*, or socialized humanity"; and finally that whereas philosophers had only "*interpreted* the world," the point now was "to *change* it" (145). At the University of Nairobi, literature was pegged to changing the world and was hence conceived as part of a powerful and inevitable epistemological project.[3] My coming into literature is a story about the insights provided by the paradigm of consciousness and of the resulting blindness.

The Universe of Meanings

My earliest teachers of literature, in both high school and the university, had cut their literary teeth under the influence of F. R. Leavis. Although considered an outsider at Cambridge University, Leavis had a network of former students who dominated the departments of English at Ibadan (Nigeria) and Makerere (Uganda), the African branches of the University of London. Most of my teachers, who had been educated at Makerere University College, had turned to the teaching of literature, instead of lucrative careers in banking or oil, because they had embraced Leavis's dictum that "English" brought an understanding of the most fundamental aspect of human life and transported one to a world above the chaos of industrial society, its alienation and violence. Literature simultaneously enhanced the truths of civilization and quarantined its privileged minority from the violence of everyday life; the "distinctive discipline of university 'English'" was a training in "intelligence" and "responsibility" (Leavis 15). Students emerging out of the violence of late colonialism embraced English as "the key to modernity" (Ngũgĩ, *Dreams* 177) or as "a wonderful preparation for the day we would be old enough to read between the lines and ask questions" (Achebe, *Education* 21).

At the same time, however, Leavis's model of literature was found inadequate in colonial and postcolonial contexts. For one, it was essentially Anglocentric—it assumed a community of readers who belonged to a common English tradition. Leavis's presumed public world—a world defined by the English language and its tradition of letters—was alien to his colonial interlocutors. The road to Canterbury, Salisbury Cathedral, and T. S. Eliot's cruel April was too far removed from the world of colonial readers to have the resonance Leavis's literary criticism presupposed. Through its mandatory primers, colonialism had sought to make distant places such as Salisbury Cathedral universal, but the images of them only enhanced the colonized sense of the unhomely (fig. 3).[4] The challenge facing my teachers, then, was how to sustain literature's mandate as a mode of consciousness outside its universalist claims. A suitable model was found in Jean-Paul Sartre's *What Is Literature?*

By the late 1960s, Sartre had fallen out of favor in Europe and been supplanted by Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, which was in turn displaced by Derrida's poststructuralism.[5] At the University of Nairobi, however, Sartre's book and the project of literary engagement that it promoted remained unquestioned for most of the 1970s. Sartre was attractive to students trying to relate the literary to the crisis of postcolonial society because of his insistence on the essential connection between the act of writing and the crisis of the present. As Edward Said aptly described Sartre's mission, it was nothing less than the relocation of literature in the world—"Literature was about the world, readers were in the world . . ." ("Opponents" 5). Although Sartre's project was universalist, it allowed for colonial difference as part of the constitution of the human being. Indeed, two seminal essays had established Sartre as the prophet of

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

postcolonial emergence: "Orphée noir," the preface to the classic introduction to negritude poetry, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, edited by Léopold Senghor (1948), and the preface to Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (1961).

But if Sartre provided my generation with an important gateway to what was to become postcolonial theory, it could also be said that his ideology of literature foreclosed the other side of the literary—the affective. It is not an exaggeration to say that my literary education, mediated through Marx, Sartre, and, later, Fanon, was contemptuous of modes of literary understanding that were not connected to what was considered the practice of thinking. My literary education sought to suppress the "mystical" side of literature, and Sartre enabled the suppression in two significant ways. First, he privileged the semantic code in writing: writers dealt with meanings; to be in literature was to be trapped in "the universe of meanings" (*What* 38); it was in prose, not poetry, that the world was disclosed; and the substance of prose was "by nature significative" (35). Second, Sartre argued that the essence of literature was writing, not reading. Writing was defined as the art of disclosing the world and offering it "as a task to the generosity of the reader" (65); the authority to create meaning and responses to it remained with the writer. My literary education had thus placed me in a semantic circle that interdicted aesthetic pleasure and affective responses.

Beyond the Significative

My literary education seemed to have left me incapable of having an affective relation with texts. I went on to do graduate work in institutions in Europe and North America,



Fig. 3
John Constable, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds*, c. 1825. Oil on canvas, 87.9 × 111.8 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art (www.metmuseum.org). Bequest of Mary Stillman Harkness, 1950.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

where my teachers and peers spent considerable time reflecting on the joys of literature, the wonder it could inspire, its affective powers, but I always felt an outsider in a universe defined by subjective rather than significative responses. This sense of aesthetic lack was aggravated when literary scholarship made its affective turn sometime in the 1990s. Suddenly, or so it seemed, all the premises on which the schools of consciousness had been built were under siege.

In "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx enjoined philosophy to retreat from idealism and return thinking to practice: "Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sideness of his thinking in practice" (144). Now this economy of debate was being challenged in new work that sought the primacy of literature and art not in meaning but in the space between what Brian Massumi, following on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, called "content and effect":

> [I]t would appear that the strength or duration of an image's effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way. This is not to say that there is no connection and no logic. What is meant here by the content of the image is its indexing to conventional meanings in an intersubjective context, its socio-linguistic qualification. This indexing fixes the *quality* of the image; the strength or duration of the image's effect could be called its *intensity*. What comes out here is that there is no correspondence or conformity between quality and intensity. If there is a relation, it is of another nature. ("Autonomy" 84–85)

My literary education had trained me for reading a variety of texts within a semantic field and a stream of consciousness. I had assumed that the feelings literature generated were inseparable from the mandate of knowledge and from the practice of thinking and that disenchantment was the condition of possibility of the novel, the quintessential genre of modern life. Now these assumptions seemed shaky. It was increasingly hard to ignore the claims of revisionist scholars of the modern experience, most notably Jane Bennett, who were arguing that the narrative of disenchantment "ignores and then discourages attentive attachment to the world," repressing playfulness and "sensory receptionality to the marvelous specificity of things" (4). Those of us who had followed Max Weber in entrenching disenchantment as the normative paradigm of modern life had effectively foreclosed what Bennett called a "phenomenology of enchantment" and a poetics of "wonderment" (4–5).

Why did a poetics of wonder and a phenomenology of enchantment powerfully challenge the semantics of literature? For one, they called attention to the ability of works of art to affirm their pure, almost wordless presence; instead of processing the literary experience through the sieve of thought, affective approaches took objects out of the realm of meaning and the conduit of practice.[6] A moment of "pure presence within wonder," Philip Fisher argued, emerged when the mind was struck by an object so different and striking "that it does not remind us of anything" (131). Having power with no reference to anything but themselves, such objects create what Peter de Bolla called "mutism," generating feelings in a "state of inarticulacy" (4).

If this is what works of art were supposed to do—generate feelings in silence—why was I never struck dumb by literary texts? Why did I react to the most powerful scenes of language with words and more words? And why did I thrive in the literary language generated by disenchantment but remain unmoved by enchanting texts? Trying to account for my relations to texts, I would pick up Ferdinand Oyono's 1956 novel *Une vie de boy* and turn to the scene where colonial violence, disenchantment, and death intersected, confident that the description of Toundi's physical and social death could move me in some direction. First the scene in the original French:

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> *Il se perdit dans une rêverie qui fut interrompue par une quinte de toux. Puis sa respiration redevint normale. Je l'aidai à s'allonger. Il ramena ses bras décharnés sur sa poitrine et les croisa. Il nous oublia dans la contemplation des nattes de raphia du toit noirci par la suie. Je remontai la méche de la lampe dont la lumière devenait de plus en plus clignotante. Elle eclaira le bord du lit de bambou où gisait l'agonisant. Son ombre se projeta sur Ie mur lézardé de l'aba où couraient deux araignées. Leurs ombres démesurément agrandies ressemblaient à deux pieuvres dont les tentacules tombaient comme les branches d'un saule pleureur sur l'ombre simiesque de la tête du moribond.*
>
> *Il fut pris de spasms, tressaillit et expira. On l'enterra dans la nuit, on ne pouvait le garder jusqu'au lendemain. Il était une charogne avant d'être un cadavre.* (13–14)

Then in the canonical English translation by John Reed:

> His mind began to wander. He was interrupted by a fit of coughing, then once more his breathing grew normal. I helped him to lie down again. He drew his wasted arms on to his breast and crossed them. We were soon forgotten as he contemplated the mats of the roof, blackened by soot. I turned up the wick of the lamp where the flame had begun to flicker. It lit up the side of the bamboo bed on which the dying man lay. His shadow was thrown on to the cracked wall of the *aba*. Two spiders were running over it. Their enormously exaggerated shadows looked like two octopuses whose tentacles hung down like the branches of a willow tree weeping over the ape-like shadow of the dying man's head. Spasms seized him. He shuddered and expired. He could not be kept till morning and they buried him directly, that night. He was already rotten before he died.
>
> (*Houseboy* 4–5)

And finally the Swahili translation by Raphael Kahaso and Nathan Mbwele:

> Akili zake zikaanza kubabaika. Akakohoa na halafu akapumua vizuri tena. Nikamlaza chini tena, akakingama mikono yake kifuani. Ni kama watu tuliokuwa tumesahauliwa peke yetu wakati alipoanza kutazama mikeka ya paa iliyojaa masizi. Nikaongeza utambi taa iwake zaidi, kwa sababu ilikuwa imeanza kuzima. Mwangaza wa taa ukamulika kitandani alimokuwa mgonjwa. Kivuli chake kilikuwa juu ya ukuta. Kulikuwa na buibui wawili waliokuwa wakitambaa ukutani juu ya kivuli hicho. Vivuli vyao vilikuwa vimefanywa kuwa vikubwa, vilivyoonekana kama walikuwa pweza wawili wakubwa, ambao mikia yao iliyojiachilia kama matawi ya miti inayokua kando ya maji, na waliokuwa wakililia kivuli cha yule mgonjwa, kilicho onekana kama nyani. Hofu ilikuwa imejaa, akatetemeka na kukata ROHO. Hawakuweza kumweka hadi asubuhi, hivyo wakamzika usiku huo. Tayari alikuwa ameanza kuoza kabla ya kufariki. (*Boi* 4)

The Swahili translation, which I read first, deploys labial and velar consonants to move readers to share Toundi's fatal encounter with colonial power. But, far from leaving me speechless and inarticulate, this language begs a response, and I keep returning to the scene of terror to witness the fate of a body that was rotten before it was dead and to understand the meaning of this social death in a semantic code.[7]

The "Dangerous Supplement"—Again

So this is where I find myself in literature, that "dangerous supplement" (Derrida 151). If the index of a phenomenology of enchantment is mutism, no text enchants me, because I have utterly failed to find one that strikes me dumb. I could explain this failure in terms of the organization of my sensorium, but my deficit seems to relate only to literary works, not art in general. I have been struck dumb in initial encounters with other forms of art, even those whose manifest subject was disenchantment: the finale of Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot*, the nuts and bolts on the columns in Richard Rogers's Terminal 5 building at

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Heathrow Airport, Pablo Picasso's *She-Goat* at the Museum of Modern Art (fig. 4).

Ironically, I find myself unmoved by visual works of art that are universally supposed to generate wonder. I have stood with others in front of Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* at the Museum of Modern Art and admired it. I have no doubt that the painting, perhaps the most important in the modern corpus, marks a transformation in the system of art. But it does not generate the same sense of wonder in me as *She-Goat*, in the garden. Why? Perhaps because the greatness of *Les demoiselles* is predetermined by the institutions of interpretation and by its location in the museum. Picasso's famous painting impresses me because it reminds me of something else—the commentaries about it and the range of references that they present. My reaction on encountering the Benin Bronzes at the British Museum is one of disappointment (fig. 5). Confronted as material objects in situ, these historic pieces of art are considerably smaller than they seemed in the pictures in my old school textbooks. The diminished size of the Benin brass works seems to undermine their immense historical claims. Is disappointment a form of wonder?



FIG. 4
Pablo Picasso, *She-Goat*, 1950. Bronze, after an assemblage of palm leaf, ceramic flowerpots, wicker basket, metal elements, and plaster, 117.7 cm high. Museum of Modern Art. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund (611.1959). © 2011 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art. Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

One could say that the exhibition space in the museum mediates the geography of emotions in these works of art and chaperones the spectator in the ways of handling feelings. If so, what may appear to be my disability in relation to the literary text could actually point to a difference between literature and other arts when it comes to affect. Literature functions in an open space, its objects moving around like the proverbial dancing mask, resisting a fixed lexicon of feelings.[8] One could, of course, argue that the literary text is mediated by paratextual elements that seek to chaperone readers' emotions the same way the exhibition does. For example, the various covers and titles of Oyono's *Une vie de boy* mask the work's violence, satirize it, or transport it to intelligible contexts. *Une vie de boy* (fig. 6) travels to become *Houseboy*, a pejorative term for a colonial servant in the anglophone tradition (fig. 7); in the American edition, only *Boy!* can carry the same weight of diminishment (fig. 8). In this case, the paratextual element is used to predetermine affective responses. In the end, though, paratextual elements will be defeated by the act of reading and the modes of desire that they generate. Can there be an affective experience that survives reading? Doesn't reading, a powerful cognitive gesture, defeat Massumi's quest for a metaphysical space for art, a place where that which is expected never appears ("Future Birth" 66)?

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Fig. 5
Edo peoples, Benin, figure of a horn blower, late sixteenth–early seventeenth cent. AD. Bronze, 62.0 cm high. © The Trustees of the British Museum / Art Resource, NY.

Reading and Remembering

These anxieties and expectations about my relation to literature reflect nothing more than my own experiences, which are more subjective than the scenes of instruction that opened these reflections. There is, after all, a primal scene of reading, a mode of literary experience that predates the formal study of literature, and this may explain why we prefer certain forms of literary expression and protocols of reading to others. For me, literature has been associated with the *Bildung* of suffering and loss and the compulsion to understand what Theodor Adorno would call "[c]onscious unhappiness" (203). If I seem to thrive in the negative dialectic of literature, it is because I first turned to narratives in an attempt to understand and perhaps come to terms with a phase of my life when what Lacan calls the symbolic order—the social world of linguistic communication—was precious and precarious (38). Born in the last years of a brutal colonial regimen, I had only vague traces and dim remembrances of the violence of what has come to be known as the British gulag in Kenya (Elkins).[9] Coming of age in the haste and optimism of decolonization, I was surrounded by people who wanted the scars of the past—the Lincoln aircraft dropping bombs in the forest, the Lancashire regiment marching in the streets, and the dusk-to-dawn curfews—dressed up or camouflaged in a narrative of an unbridled future. The official slogan was forget and forgive. Memory was the enemy of progress.

I was not comfortable with the narrative of forgetting. Too many vague events needed clarification. Members of my family were missing and buried in unmarked graves. Something terrible had taken place in what should have been the idyll of my childhood, and I wanted to understand what it was,

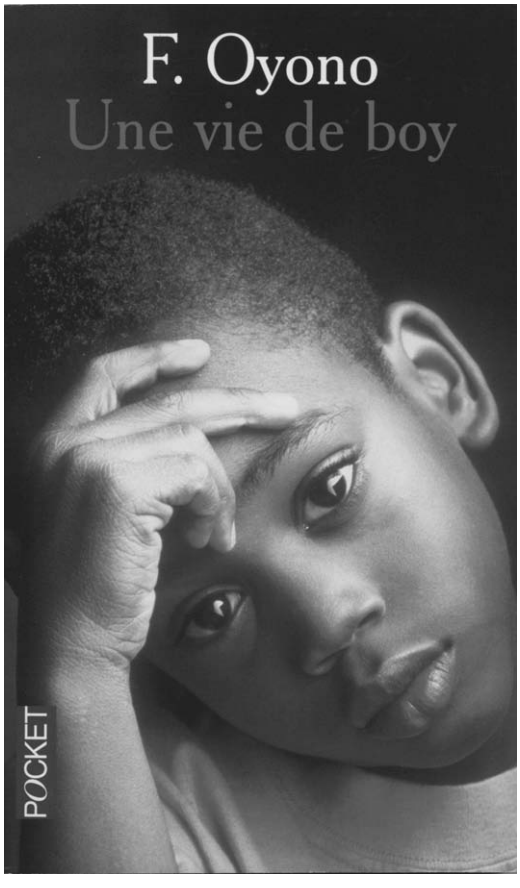


Fig. 6
Paris: Distribooks, 2006.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

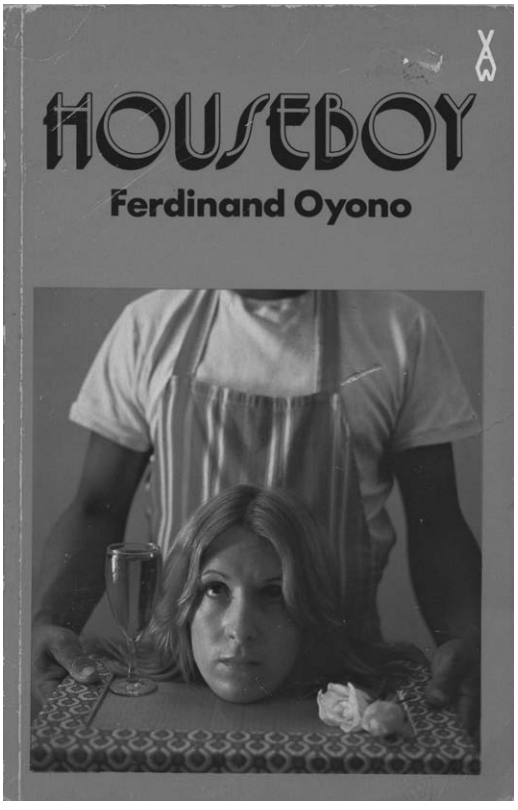


Fig. 7
Oxford: Heinemann Intl., 1975.

to reimagine it, to account for it. And since those who had witnessed these events had chosen not to speak, I turned to the library, to literature, in search of the missing past. I first encountered that past in *Weep Not, Child*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's autobiographical novel of growing up under the shadow of Mau Mau. I vividly remember the terror and the thrill of seeing unspeakable words spoken. The novel promoted the possibilities of a *Bildung* and the promise of the narrative paradigm of modernity. And if my identification with Njoroge, the protagonist, was almost total, it was because the novel was enacting fully something that was truncated in memory—the scene of colonial violence—and mapping out the compromised status of the narrative paradigm at the interstices of colonialism and postcoloniality.

The narrative of education was not simply an utterance of that which others had sought to repress but also a rehearsal of the now familiar interplay between the romance of education and of social mobility and the brutal logic of domination:

> Nyokabi called him. She was a small, black woman, with a bold but grave face. One could tell by her small eyes full of life and warmth that she had once been beautiful. But time and bad conditions do not favour beauty. All the same, Nyokabi had retained her full smile—a smile that lit up her dark face.
>
> "Would you like to go to school?"
>
> "O, mother!" Njoroge gasped. He half feared that the woman might withdraw her words. There was a little silence till she said,
>
> "We are poor. You know that."
>
> "Yes, mother." His heart pounded against his ribs slightly. His voice was shaky.
>
> "So you won't be getting a mid-day meal like other children."

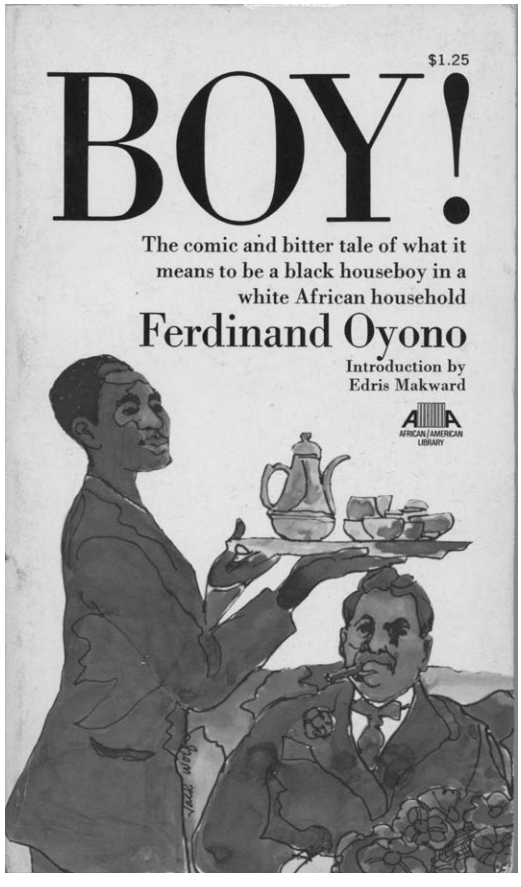


Fig. 8
New York: Macmillan, 1970.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> "I understand."
>
> "You won't bring shame to me by one day refusing to attend school?"
>
> O *mother, I'll never bring shame to you. Just let me get there, just let me.* The vision of his childhood again opened before him. For a time he contemplated the vision. He lived in it alone. It was just there, for himself; a bright future . . . Aloud he said, "I like school."
>
> (Ngũgĩ, *Weep Not* 1; ellipsis in orig.)

The intersection between my life and the novel would begin here, in this poignant scene of reading in a foundational African bildungsroman. "Would you like to go to school?" The simple question posed by the loving mother to her son was a beginning of what Said would call a desire for beginnings (*Beginnings* 82). School would be the gift and debt of the future. It opens the vision of childhood and lays out the future for contemplation. The son lives in that vision: "It was just there, for himself; a bright future . . ." This is a fatal ellipsis because it signals the impossibility of the vision of childhood and education. Njoroge will pay a heavy price for his new beginning in the school and text: he will be expelled from school, arrested, and tortured as what was promised as a vision of the future sinks into "a succession of nothingness" (133). Reading this novel at the age of ten or eleven initiated me into a world in which literature—more specifically, the institution of narrative—would "fill gaps in an incomplete world" and generate a desire to create a new beginning (Said, *Beginnings* 82).

The Literary *Pharmakon*

I am often reminded of the transformative power of literature when I teach classes on extreme forms of social suffering, including genocide, racial violence, and torture. The students who take these classes see them as opportunities to reflect on the persistence of evil in the modern period, the age of freedom. Some of them are interested in the role of the imagination in negotiating what have often been considered unspeakable events; others are curious about the role of language in situations of extreme violence and suffering. But, over the years, the classes have also attracted students whose relation to the violent events has been too close for comfort. These have included the grandchildren of survivors of the Shoah and the Jim Crow South. Occasionally, the class has attracted both children of exiles from apartheid South Africa and the offspring of key figures in the old racist system. More recently, a majority of the students in these classes have come from outposts of postcolonial violence—Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia.

How do these students handle forms of suffering that are part of their own historical or cultural memories? Some of the students mention their connection to these events only in passing, but most want to use their familial connections to the violence represented in works such as Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, André Brink's *A Dry White Season*, and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* to raise the perennial question of the author's ethical responsibility. They worry about how the imperative to remember these events is to be reconciled with the necessity to forget them in the name of restorative justice. But our reflections on the relation between literature and any ethical mandates that we might place on authors are troubled by another type of student—the one who simply cannot handle the fictionalization of events that are intimately connected to his or her own suffering. What is the professor's response to a student who asks to be excused from reading certain books because they deal with events that traumatized the student or his or her family and are hence too painful to be encountered in best-selling works that cater to what some critics have labeled "a market for suffering" (Kleinman, Das, and Lock xi)?

My typical response to the request for abstention is to let the students deal with the

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

texts that trouble them in their own way and time, which is taken as an excuse from class. Of course, I worry about the future of such students in this field of study, since literature seems mandated to represent violent histories, but I hold the hope that texts that threaten to resuscitate historical ghosts and decauterize old wounds will create new paths into the imagination. And they often do so unexpectedly. Weeks, months, even years later, a student will write me to apologize for not having read the troublesome text for the class and to assure me that he or she returned to it afterward and found it rewarding and transformative.

That is the kind of story I could share with my grandmother. I would then tell her that literature is like the lamp in the painting by Romare Bearden on the cover of this issue of *PMLA*. The lamp enables the encounter with the text, which in turn opens up the world. It is not incidental that when asked to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Bearden put reading at the center of his collage. For me literature has been the lamp of knowledge, a symbol of enlightenment and a path to immeasurable freedom through sometimes violent encounters. Here we have the poison and the cure.

Simon Gikandi

Notes

1. The radical lesson of reading, which shaped the education of my generation, was from Derrida: "Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent . . . or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language" (158). I borrow the idea of the social imaginary from Charles Taylor.

2. Lyotard defines the differend as "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be"; in the differend "something 'asks' to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away" (13).

3. A background to this tradition can be found in Ngũgĩ, *Writers*.

4. V. S. Naipaul first encountered Salisbury Cathedral as an insignia of Englishness in the colonial primer and was haunted by it until he exorcised it in *The Enigma of Arrival*. For the role of the Nelson Caribbean primer on the making of the postcolonial imagination, see Fraser. A compelling discussion of the postcolonial unhomely appears in Bhabha.

5. Young addresses the history of these transformations.

6. Theories of affect are, of course, more complex and diverse than this brief account. A fairly representative sample of theoretical work can be found in Gregg and Seigworth.

7. I am using the concept of social death as defined by Patterson: it refers to the subject's ostracization from natal spaces and collective histories, to "a loss of native status, . . . deracination" (7).

8. This observation is derived from a saying in Achebe's *Arrow of God*: "The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place" (46).

9. Besides Elkins's book, recent studies of this period in the history of empire include those by Anderson and by Branch.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Arrow of God*. New York: Doubleday, 1967. Print.

———. *The Education of a British-Protected Child: Essays*. New York: Knopf, 2009. Print.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: Seabury, 1973. Print.

Anderson, David. *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. London: Weidenfeld, 2005. Print.

Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Branch, Daniel. *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.

de Bolla, Peter. *Art Matters*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976. Print.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Eliot, George. *The Mill on the Floss*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Elkins, Carole. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York: H. Holt, 2005. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Engels, Friedrich. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*. New York: Intl., 1941. Print.

Fisher, Philip. *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. Print.

Fraser, Robert. *Book History through Postcolonial Eyes: Rewriting the Script*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.

Kleinman, Arthur, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock. Introduction. *Social Suffering*. Ed. Kleinman, Das, and Lock. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. ix–xxvii. Print.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977. Print.

Leavis, F. R. *The Living Principle: English as a Discipline of Thought*. London: Chatto, 1975. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988. Print.

Marx, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach." *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978. 143–45. Print.

Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect." *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995): 83–109. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Aug. 2011.

———. "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat." Gregg and Seigworth 52–70.

Naipaul, V. S. *The Enigma of Arrival*. New York: Vintage, 1988. Print.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*. New York: Pantheon, 2010. Print.

———. *Weep Not, Child*. London: Heinemann Educ., 1964. Print.

———. *Writers in Politics*. London: Heinemann Educ., 1981. Print.

Oyono, F. *Boi*. Trans. Raphael Kahaso and Nathan Mbwele. Nairobi: Heinemann Educ., 1976. Print.

———. *Houseboy*. Trans. John Reed. Oxford: Heinemann Intl., 1975. Print.

———. *Une vie de boy*. Paris: Distribooks, 2006. Print.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985. Print.

Said, Edward W. *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. Print.

———. "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community." *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 (1982): 1–26. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Aug. 2011.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Orphée noir." *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*. Ed. Léopold Sédar Senghor. Paris: PUF, 1969. ix–xliv. Print.

———. "Préface à l'édition de 1961." *Les damnés de la terre*. By Frantz Fanon. Paris: La Découverte Poche, 2002. 17–36. Print.

———. *What Is Literature?* What Is Literature? *and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988. 21–245. Print.

Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.

Young, Robert. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.1.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press